Safer Communities Riots Editorial - Dr Daniel Briggs

Introduction

This edition of *Safer Communities* is dedicated to the social disorder which recently occurred across the country in August 2011. It is clear that the events left us with much to discuss and, in this edition, we seek to discuss some of the most pressing questions. How and why did the social unrest evolve? (Briggs, 2012) Did the police play a role in triggering the 'riots'? (Klein, 2012) Were there clear political motivations for the disturbances? (Angel, 2012) What was the 'profile' of those who were apprehended and charged? (Clarke, 2012) What is different about this social unrest and how is it new? (Baker, 2012) Was it a symbol that society is 'sick'? (Durkin, 2012) How can we seek to disaggregate the political rhetoric which subsequently followed? (Heap and Smithson, 2012) How can social media networks generate reflexive discussions on the riots? (Kelly and Gill, 2012)

To the everyday person, the sequence of violence we witnessed appeared to have evolved from nothing in a matter of days; and I think for many people, it was surprise and a shock to know that this kind of thing could happen so quickly. 'Senseless acts', 'hooligans', 'violent youth' were just some blog entries describing the actions. I recall scrolling down my Facebook friends' statuses, and saw most condemned the actions…well it looks like none of my 'friends' got involved. However, I think the events represented deeper symptoms of embedded social problems but also social changes which have, for some time, started to spill over into our everyday lives. Quite disturbingly, the most pressing accusation of what the violence represented came from the government who said it was 'criminality, pure and simple'. Wow, I didn't know that such people exist; people who have crime and violence pumping through their veins; who are so alien from the rest of us they have little lair called Criminal Land where they all hang out and make dark plans to raid Currys and Greggs. Reinforcing the difference of the people involved in the social unrest - when we collectively do not share an understanding of their situations – makes them look like savage beings; faulty people; raging characters let loose on society. But they are like you and I, they are human.

Other than that, **who** are they really? What is their story? Are they local? What do they represent? Are we really in a position to say having not talked to/consulted with them? Are they all young people? Are they from the marginalised, urban estates or/and from other areas? Are they related? How are they connected? Are the guys smashing the police cars, the same guys looting shops? Are the young people and other members of the community standing at the side watching or involved? Did they get involved? The statistics don't give much idea. Take London for example. Official statistics revealed that the average 'rioter' in London had 15 convictions. By September 12th, 1715 had been processed in the capital with 462 found guilty and 315 sentenced. Most of the convictions were for burglary (n=763), violent disorder, (n=459) and theft (n=229) (Ministry of Justice, 2011). The statistics may tell one story but they hide the underlying messages.

Over the early August period, I overheard countless conversations about the social unrest on trains, buses, in take-aways, parks and shopping malls. Many of them were moralising the behaviour, frowning on the 'faulty people' and their actions, and shrugging shoulders and questioning each other 'what's wrong with these people?' Indeed, a large proportion of these people didn't seem to know where to start when considering 'why' this all happened and the 'insanity' of the events certainly threw up far too many questions for the media and the politicians to cope with. Over that week early in August, I followed the news with interest. First there were the victim testimonies, then

the endless discussions of effective policing, then the debates about sentencing, then finally the blame fell on the usual suspects - such as 'gangs'. I loved that one. Yep, let's pick a social group which we still don't really know a great deal about and say it was them anyway so we can all direct our hate on to those people (or those which carry that stereotype, they're all the same really).

It was also so painful to watch the desperate media scramble from location to location, trying to get the most dramatic angle of the infernos or to piggyback the police officers while giving a 'live update' as they charged the street mobs. If the public weren't shocked by the TV images, they couldn't have missed the endless pictures and clips on the internet. Live text updates on the BBC website of what was happening, where. 'Crime live'. CSI is on but how about some 'live violence'. Brilliant, just like the movies. The public were more than happy to shake their heads in disapproval but at the same time were revelling in 'riot fever'. The news stories were incessant; the next hotspot, the next victim. The story of the lost family business in Croydon; the moving figure of an old man trying to tidy up his DIY store in north London; the brittle voice of an onlooker with her family, scared to come out of the house. All makes for a public unsympathetic and critical of the motives of the instigators.

Then came the interviews with politicians. I think Diane Abbott was one of the first to appear on the BBC on Monday 8th August. She was interviewed 'live' with the scenery of the violence as a backdrop: *'look at me in my community and look how much I give a shit about it.'* She then proceeded avoid important and direct questions about police, underlying racist treatment and the community relations. No one wants to talk about the real issues; no one really wants to listen to the community. What a mistake that may have been because it is precisely these communities that suffer the most. They live in the violence, see it, experience it, are reluctant to report it or/and have given up trying. Some self police in the wake of either lack of confidence in the police to deal with matters or a lack of police presence in general. The same communities even organised voluntary clear-up schemes across London each morning to deal with the post-riot mess. Not just Big Society but Absolutely Immense Society. What a community that is!

Many people continue to ask questions – as do we – and it is our questions which form the basis for our response to the August unrest. Firstly, my paper will give some empirical context to the social disorder by disaggregating the events by timeline: from August 4th when Mark Duggan was killed to mid August when the coverage and attention suddenly returned to Libya. In the time since the disorder, I spoke to as many people as possible – those involved in the riots, community members, professionals - to find out what 'they did when it happened' (Briggs, 2012). I offer an early conceptual model which presents reasons 'why' people got involved. Continuing in this questioning of 'why', Klein (2012) questions 'austerity' as the culprit for the social disorder, instead arguing that it is the way in which people are policed which leads to social unrest. Drawing on examples from other countries, Klein parallels the experience of the London riots with an intensification of policing strategies which compromises the desired effect of protecting public order and safety, and instead provoking social disorder.

Similarly, Angel (2012) disaggregates both the trigger event and the underlying social conditions to charts how and why the riots took the form they did; the crux of his argument to establish whether the riots were politically motivated. In doing so, he discusses why some social groups got involved while others didn't by suggesting it was a matter of how social exclusions and joblessness is

experienced. Concluding, he notes that the riots should be understood and responded to as illustrations of crises in economic and political relations rather than simply problems of morality, culture and the efficiency, or otherwise of the criminal justice apparatus.

There was an overwhelming suggestion that those involved in the unrest already had 'criminal convictions' and were attached to 'gangs'. However, Clarke (2012) shows in a sample of 79 offenders processed through Manchester Probation, that nearly half were entering the criminal justice system for the first time. Using data available through the Probation service, she provides further context on the profiles of those who were charged through the courts. The way in which the riots spread so quickly was something which this country had not witnessed and Baker (2012) considers the role of new social media in this regard. She charts changes in discourse about the 'crowd' from 19th century conceptions of 'the criminal crowd' to modern-day conceptions of, what she calls, 'the mediated crowd'. She argues that there was a lack of focus of the social context of the riots and that consideration needs to be given to the emotional reasons that individuals engaged in collective behaviour given the virtual capacity and mobility of 'the mediated crowd.'

Durkin's (2012) work considers the term of 'sick society' – a label termed by Cameron in the aftermath of the social unrest. In doing so, she uses illness as a metaphor and charts the spread of 'sickness' in society. In doing so, she examines the role of mental health professionals in diagnosing bad behaviour and the use of a medical model to offer a 'cure'. She recommends consideration of the economic, environmental, behavioural and emotional constructs which underlie the recent violence in order to tackle the issue. Heap and Smithson (2012) critically appraise the continually evolving criminal justice and social policy frameworks, which serve as the benchmark for disorderly conduct to be measured against. They consider policy developments from 1997 to the present day in an attempt to explain how the spread of contractual governance and increased legislation around conduct regulation could have contributed to the societal climate in which the riots occurred. Like Durkin (2012), they also consider some of the post-riot rhetoric, unpacking the remarks and statements made by Cameron et al. Lastly, Kelly and Gill (2012) reflect on the use of an online discussion forum, generated to discuss the which gender intersects with the riots and their aftermath and the role of consumerism and race, media and how criminal justice system responses have been received by both the media and the general public.

References

Ministry of Justice (2011) *Statistical bulletin on the public disorder of 6th-9th August 2011*- available online at http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/statistics-and-data/criminal-justice/public-disorder-august-11.htm